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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Müller, A. (2016). The Margins and the Marginalised: Social Policy, Labour Migration, and Ethnic Identity in Contemporary China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, *45*(2), 3-27. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-9620

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Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Topical Issue: Marginalisation and State Intervention in China
Guest Editor: Armin Müller

Müller, Armin (2016)
The Margins and the Marginalised: Social Policy, Labour Migration, and Ethnic Identity in Contemporary China, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 45, 2, 3–27.

URN: http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-9620

ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this introduction and the other articles can be found at:
<www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and Hamburg University Press.

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The Margins and the Marginalised: Social Policy, Labour Migration, and Ethnic Identity in Contemporary China

Armin MÜLLER

The process of economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s has sparked unique patterns of economic, institutional, and social change in the PRC. It has fuelled rapid economic growth and helped to lift millions out of absolute poverty. However, this process has also increased inequality and the social distance between different groups of the population. Deng Xiaoping's dictum that "some will get rich first" (一部分先富起来, *yi bufen xian fu qi lai*) lacked any specification regarding how the others would later catch up. The institutional cleavages that separate the privileged from the underprivileged have been largely inherited from the planned economy. New social dynamics of exclusion developed on their basis in an environment characterised by marketisation. Social privilege and social security were strongly connected to employment status, which demarcated a hierarchy between civil servants, employees in state-owned and collective enterprises, and the rest of the population. The household registration system (户口, *hukou*) was used as an instrument of migration control and for the allocation of goods, services, and entitlements under the planned economy. In the reform period, it remained a crucial force of social stratification. Finally, the classification of "minority nationality" (少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*) status created in the course of post-1949 nation building led to a conflation of ethno-cultural identity with socio-economic "backwardness" in the context of a lack of true political autonomy, spatial concentration of poverty, and below-average levels of education and public services in China's vast Western regions. However, it also entitled the holders of this title to preferential treatment under the one-child policy and in the education system.

This volume of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* builds upon existing research on marginalised groups in contemporary China. It explores different dimensions of marginalisation and their connection to governmental policies, along with the public policy responses to marginalisation. The aim of this introductory article is to provide a

conceptual umbrella for the contributions in this issue and a brief background on the field of research. The studies in this volume are quite diverse. They include policy studies as well as ethnographic research. Their analytical focus ranges from the transnational diffusion of social policy knowledge to the strategies of rural-to-urban migrants in a speculative market located in Shanghai. What unites them is the idea of marginalised groups in Chinese society as a direct or indirect frame of reference.

The rest of this article is organised as follows: the first part provides a conceptual discussion of marginality and marginalisation, with particular emphasis on their application to China Studies and to the contributions of this volume. The second part offers a general introduction to the first of two larger themes of this volume – marginalisation in terms of social security. It briefly discusses the development of China's social security system and how it shaped the emergence of marginalised groups in the context of the economic reforms. It continues with a summary of the three contributions in this volume that focus on social policy initiatives. The third part introduces the second theme of this volume: ethnic identity and migration. Against the backdrop of marginalisation connected to ethnicity and informal migration, it discusses the two contributions in this volume that deal exclusively with those topics and touches on one of the social policy papers that covers both major themes.

Conceptual Discussion

According to Endruweit, Trommsdorff, and Burzan (2002: 280ff), social marginality refers to a position on the margins of a social group or society, or in between two social groups or societies, and it is often associated with the national state as a point of reference. It is conceptually based on the distinction between the social core and the periphery and typically describes the relationship of peripheral, minoritarian individuals or groups to a homogeneous, majoritarian social core. Borrowing from Bourdieu's terminology, social distance can manifest itself in the unequal equipping of individuals with different forms of economic, cultural, social, or symbolic capital – which may or may not be connected to physical differences, such as disability or different ethnicity, or specific patterns of spatial distribution or segregation of the population. Marginality, furthermore, implies a lack of

access to social fields such as politics, education, and the economy. Marginal individuals' participation – access to and influence on decision making – in such fields is often limited, as is their endowment with the benefits and special capitals – or resources – these fields have to offer. Marginal individuals are thus characterised by a lack of economic wealth, political influence, education, and/or social recognition. Processes of marginalisation are the recurrent social mechanisms (Mayntz 2004) which prevent full and exclusive social integration and maintain existing social inequality, discrimination, and/or stigmatisation.

Previous works in China Studies usually defined the term "marginalisation" in a way that fit their specific research interest and object of study. For example, Wong's classic monograph *Marginalization and Social Welfare in China* is tailored to the targets of welfare policy under the Ministry of Civil Affairs:

> By marginal groups are meant individuals who are excluded from participation in the social life of the community. Their ranks include people who are unable to work, individuals who have no family, households stricken with poverty, persons who need help to overcome temporary hardships […], the mentally and physically disabled, and all those who lack the skill of unassisted survival. (Wong 1998)

She distinguishes between a system of contributory benefits and benefits as of right on the one hand, and selective, remedial, and/or means-tested services and benefits on the other. The former refers to China's work-based welfare system at the time of her writing, which offered comprehensive benefits to the employees of state-owned and collective enterprises, as described below in greater detail. The latter refers to a system of limited social welfare benefits for the rest of the population. The studies under the social security theme of this volume are closer to this approach to marginalisation, in that they frame marginalisation primarily in economic terms and – in most cases – implicitly refer to a single social core rather than multiple ones.

In the edited volume *Marginalization in Urban China*, marginalisation

> refers to the process through which particular social groups obtain lower status and become peripheral in a society. The concept is related to poverty but marginalization emphasizes the dynamics of a downwards social trajectory rather than current living standards.

> The term also emphasizes external and often structural forces (such as the changing labor market) that exert influence on the social status of a group or people. Thus, marginalization refers to broad social processes by which social groups are becoming more unequal. (Wu and Webster 2010: 1)

Wu's and Webster's academic backgrounds are strongly characterised by geography and urban planning, and their approach to marginalisation fuses categories of physical and social space. Their joint works are to some extent inspired by studies on "global cities" and tendencies towards social polarisation and ghettoisation associated with economic restructuring and economic globalisation (Hamnet 2010; Wu 2009). Among their central themes are property rights, spatial segregation, and urban villages in Chinese cities. Urban villages provide rental income to peri-urban farmers who lost their land during urbanisation, as well as cheap housing to migrant workers. They form spatial concentration points of marginalised life, but the respective trajectories of marginalisation differ substantially from those found in cities in the United States and other advanced industrial economies (Webster and Wu 2010).

Cheung and colleagues take a more historical and constructivist perspective on the idea of marginalisation, which they tightly link to their concept of minorities:

> Minority implies being at once part of and alternative to society. It means living in common with other groups while maintaining national, ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, gender, sexual, class, and other differences based on ascriptive ties. (Cheung, Lee, and Nedilsky 2009: 3)

Their edited volume *Marginalization in China* thus focuses on

> persistent prejudices against marginal groups from late imperial China to the present, and the moral claims groups have mustered in response. Female farmers, religious faithful, migrant workers, and criminal elements have historically been marginalised […] [because] their very existence questions the long-standing representations of productive, norm-observant, and loyal community members. (Cheung, Lee, and Nedilsky 2009: 2)

The state plays a crucial role through its creation of graded citizenship, the institutional manifestations of which include the label of minority nationalities, the system of household registration and its connection to social privilege, and privileged access to education via

affirmative action under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The studies on migration and ethnic identity in this volume are closer to this approach to marginalisation.

In more abstract terms, marginality as a concept can describe either a unipolar relationship with the focus on a single social core, as in the case of homeless or disabled people, or a bipolar (or multipolar) relationship between two (or more) social cores, as in the case of international migrants. In both cases, social distance to the core(s) is a crucial characteristic of a marginal social position. Both notions of marginality are represented in the papers in this volume: for example, national social assistance policies target a group seen by the central government as marginalised vis-à-vis the core of China's national society. Labour migrants are typically caught in between the local communities of their sending and destination points. Finally, the ethnic identity of China's minority nationalities is formed and constructed vis-à-vis a supposedly homogeneous Han majority, as well as other minority identities.

Finally, research on marginality often emphasises the structural aspects of marginalisation. Individuals and groups on the margins of society are typically portrayed as passive victims of existing structures, as is, for example, often the case with international migrants or people with disabilities. However, some lines of research have placed greater emphasis on individual agency and self-chosen marginalisation – for example, in the case of deviant behaviour. The ethnographic articles in this volume that deal with the situation of rural-to-urban migrants in Shanghai (Rumin Luo) and ethnic Mongols in Qinghai (Ute Wallenböck) both portray the marginalised groups as strategising actors. They actively engage with the formal institutions that marginalise them, or create informal institutions to bypass them in order to improve their social position. Taking a different approach, the three policy studies featured in this volume (Liu Tao and Sun Li; Armin Müller; Matthias Stepan and Lu Quan) focus on how governmental actors on the central and subnational levels create and adapt social policy programmes to compensate for the marginalising effects of institutional structures and socio-economic processes. This brings them closer to a structure-centred view (Endruweit, Trommersdorff, and Burzan 2002).

Social Security and Economic Reforms

One central aspect of this volume is social policies directed at social groups marginalised during the period of economic reforms. According to Gough and Wood (2004), individuals can access resources for social security and to protect against social risks from four types of institutions: the state, the market, community, and the family. The state and the market are largely associated with formalised, specialised, and comparatively effective systems of social security, whereas community and family are more often associated with informal, unspecialised social security, which is assumed to be far less effective. Even though there are important exceptions, social distance in these fields manifests itself in the type of institutions accessible to different individuals or groups, and in the level of protection that these institutions offer. Marginalisation in terms of social security thus mainly points to a structurally determined lack of access to effective, formal mechanisms of social security among certain individuals or groups, and their consequent reliance on ineffective, informal mechanisms. Marginalisation in terms of social security has come to reinforce poverty in reform China, and for a long time political debates about social policy revolved around the theme of fighting poverty. Norms of social justice have, however, become more prominent in political discourses only over the past decade or so.

Social security has undergone very substantial changes since the founding of the People's Republic, which was followed by the creation of a comprehensive social security system. People were protected from a large array of social risks by the state and the organisational structure of the planned economy it established and controlled. Social security largely followed a subsistence principle: in urban China, people would rely first on the family, second on the work unit (单位, *danwei*), third on neighbourhood organisations, and fourth on the state. In the rural areas, rural collectives and community replaced the work unit and neighbourhood organisations, and the role of the state was much more limited. Under this structure, employment status, the urban/rural divide, and decentralisation created steep hierarchies in terms of social privilege and effective access to social security. The family remained a crucial source of social security, the relative importance of which depended on the household members' access to other institutions (Klotzbücher 2006; Wong 1998; Zheng, Gao, and Yu 2010).

In China's urban areas, state-owned and collective enterprises became the institutional foundation of labour insurance (劳动保险, *laodong baoxian*), which offered comprehensive benefits for healthcare, pensions, and occupational accidents. Labour insurance was originally managed by China's labour unions, which conducted social pooling above the company level. During the Cultural Revolution, the labour unions became largely dysfunctional and labour insurance benefits were paid directly from company budgets without a strong component of inter-company pooling. This rendered the level of benefits dependent on the economic situation of the respective company, and at the beginning of the reform period there were a large number of elderly workers who had not been able to retire during the Cultural Revolution. Civil servants working in government, party, and public service units were covered by separate insurance systems, which were largely funded from government budgets and offered more generous benefits (Zheng, Gao, and Yu 2010).

Beyond social insurance, the units of production in urban China had comprehensive functions in social security and public service provision. The scope of benefits and services depended strongly on the size of the unit, and could include medical services by company doctors or hospitals; childcare and education via kindergartens, schools, and vocational training; and canteens or the provision of employment for the employees' children. Mass organisations under the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Communist Youth League, and the All-China Women's Federation were represented in state-owned and collective enterprises and participated in the organisation of the employment-based welfare system, also known as the "iron rice bowl" (Leung and Nann 1995; Zhang 2005).

In the rural areas, too, social security was organised primarily via the economic units of production – production brigades (生产大队, *shengchan dadui*) and people's communes (人民公社, *renmin gongshe*). In the course of the collectivisation of agriculture, they replaced the family as the primary units of economic production, and also took over and altered some of the family's social functions. Rural collectives largely operated on the basis of subsistence. Therefore, differences in economic development and productivity affected local levels of social welfare more directly. The collective organisation of agriculture allowed local leaders to redistribute economic resources and to mobilise labour for the creation of public infrastructure or public

health campaigns. It also supported barefoot doctors and health centres, schools, canteens and other public service providers. The main specialised social security programmes were the system of five guarantees (五保, *wubao*), a kind of social assistance scheme, and the cooperative medical schemes (合作医疗, *hezuo yiliao*), which largely mobilised funding for the provision of preventive and basic curative care services. Both systems were deeply embedded in the institutions of collective agriculture (Hussain 1990; Klotzbücher 2006).

The initiation of the economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s inflicted substantial institutional changes on the existing systems of public social security. The urban, employment-based welfare system entered a state of "drift" – gradual decline due to changes in the institutional environment (Streeck and Thelen 2005) – rendering it increasingly dysfunctional. Demographic change facilitated rising expenditures for the livelihood of increasing numbers of retirees, while economic opening and the competition with foreign and private enterprises put state-owned and collective enterprises under pressure. Labour insurance came to disadvantage public enterprises, as it did not cover much of the non-public sector. Private and foreign-invested enterprises thus had to pay lower social benefits.

> The growth in welfare expenditure correlated with increasing numbers of people retiring from work. The number of retirees leaped […] from 3 million in 1978 to over 26 million in 1992, and the ratio of employees to retirees decreased from 30:1 in 1978 to only 5.7:1 in 1992. This is an average figure; the ratio […] varies from 90:1 in some young enterprises to a mere 2:1 in some older enterprises. (Leung and Nann 1995: 63f)

Many public enterprises were not willing or able to provide the full amount of health and pension benefits they owed, thus decreasing the effective protection labour insurance offered. Furthermore, the massive lay-offs connected to state-owned enterprise reforms reinforced the need for more effective unemployment benefits and social assistance. These pressures facilitated experimentation with new schemes of social insurance and social assistance in urban China (Duckett 2001; Frazier 2010; Krieg and Schädler 1994; Zheng, Gao, and Yu 2010).

In the rural areas, the return to family farming largely replaced collective agriculture with the household responsibility system (家庭联产承包责任制, *jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*). Eradicating their

foundation caused an exhaustion and collapse of the planned economy institutions of social security, and their "displacement" (Streeck and Thelen 2005) by the family as the primary guarantor of social security. Political leaders were deprived of crucial tools to mobilise labour and economic resources for public service provision and social security, as well as for the maintenance of government operations. Such activities needed to be financed by the direct collection of fees and charges from the rural households, which became a substantial issue of contention in the 1990s and ultimately led to the formal abolishment of various fees, charges, and taxes on the rural population (Bernstein and Lü 2003; Göbel 2010). The return to family farming also undermined the funding of cooperative medical care and the five guarantees system. The family and networks of consanguinity and personal relationships became the crucial guarantors of social security for the individual. However, the family as an institution was increasingly overburdened by the need to provide social security. Although it was solely responsible for a large set of functions, including childcare, education, healthcare, and eldercare, its capacity to fulfil these functions was undermined by trends towards youth autonomy and the stronger social role women had come to play during the planned economy, and by the effects of the one-child policy and the demographic transition (Hussain 1990; Krieg and Schädler 1994; Yan 2003).

Marginalisation and Social Destabilisation

In the 1980s and 1990s, comprehensive social security had become the privilege of established urban employees. Employing a unipolar concept of marginalisation, public sector employees and civil servants in urban China can be defined as a non-majoritarian "core" of mainland Chinese society. The institutional structures of China's social security system created a substantial social distance across the urban/rural divide, and across the divide between the private and the public sector. Despite substantial local differences, as a rule of thumb the urban population remained entitled to much better public services and more diverse and effective social protections than the rural population. Among the urban population, there was, furthermore, a sharp divide between public sector employees and civil servants, who remained covered by social insurance, and employees of the private sector or the unemployed, who largely lacked such coverage. The social distance created by the institutions of public social security

could be compensated for by other factors, such as higher wages in the foreign-invested sector of the economy (Leung and Nann 1995: 145f).

Marketisation greatly enhanced income inequality in both rural and urban China. While millions were lifted out of absolute poverty, marketisation created both wealth and poverty in relative terms (Davis and Wang 2009). The reforms of state-owned enterprises in the second half of the 1990s, for example, led to a steep increase in unemployment, which, according to recent studies, has since remained above the averages of low-, middle-, and high-income countries worldwide (Feng, Hu, and Moffit 2015). The urban social security system connected many social benefits to employment in a state-owned or collective enterprise, thus creating lasting disadvantages for various social groups. Work-based welfare enhanced urban income inequality rather than reducing it, thus contributing to the marginalisation of private-sector employees and the unemployed; in rural China, too, social security further enhanced income inequality, but benefit levels overall remained rather insignificant (Qin and Riskin 2009; see also: Chan 2011; Heberer 2009; Lüthje, Luo, and Zhang 2013). The return to reliance on the family for social security among large parts of the population also reinforced the marginalisation of specific sub-groups. Yan (2003), for instance, describes the increasing dysfunctionality of changing rural family structures in eldercare, and the precarious situation and dependence of many elderly citizens. Other studies point towards the marginalisation of children and elderly women in access to healthcare, most notably in poorer families (Cailliez 1998; Gu, Gao, and Yao 2005).

Marketisation and marginalisation enhanced and concentrated the effects of social risks, which in turn facilitated social phenomena that government and party actors interpreted as social destabilisation. Mass layoffs in the urban areas and the illicit collection of fees and charges by underfunded local governments in rural China provoked massive protests and social conflict. The commercialisation and defunding of China's healthcare system, along with the receding health insurance coverage, brought illness and medical treatment costs to the top of the list of poverty generators in urban and rural China (Ministry of Health 2009). Poverty in old age is a phenomenon concentrated in the rural areas, also due to the long-standing absence of pension insurance there (Cai 2012). Contributing to poverty and po-

tentially threatening the emergence and stability of middle classes and economic wealth, these phenomena contradicted central development goals of the CCP. The vacuum in social security and the problematic access to healthcare further facilitated a revival of traditional and ethno-specific practices of healing (Bunkenborg 2012; Heberer 2001). They also contributed to the rise of sects and other spiritual and religious groups, which relied on promises of good health for their faithful followers as a central strategy of mobilisation (Kupfer 2008; Oblau 2011). The incidents connected to Falun Gong also point to the potential of marginalisation in social security to contribute to political destabilisation.

New Social Policies Targeting Marginalised Groups

Since the late 1990s, China has enacted an array of policies to balance out the inequalities of its development path. They include umbrella programmes for socio-economic development such as the initiative to "Open Up the West" (西部大开发, *xibu da kai fa*) and the "Construction of a New Socialist Countryside" (新农村建设, *xin nongcun jianshe*) (Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Goodman 1999). Furthermore, they include specific social policy initiatives, which mark a distinct shift in welfare governance (see also: Stepan and Müller 2012): these initiatives have abandoned the principle of local community subsistence and turned to contributions from different levels of government as a financing mechanism, and they build upon the *hukou* system as an institutional foundation of administration, access, and eligibility regulations.

Three contributions in this volume analyse these new social policies. The paper by Liu Tao and Sun Li focuses on the creation of a social assistance scheme called the "Minimum Livelihood Guarantee" (最低生活保障, *zuidi shenghuo baozhang* or simply "*dibao*"). The enactment of the urban *dibao* scheme in 1999 was followed by a reinforced promotion of rural *dibao* since 2003. The origins of the programme can be traced back to Shanghai's efforts to cope with state-owned enterprise layoffs in the early 1990s. Today, the programme systematically targets households below a certain level of income. The focus of Liu and Sun's paper is the transnational diffusion of ideas and norms as an input of Chinese policy processes, with the United States, Europe, and Hong Kong as the central sites. It is based on expert interviews with Chinese academics and civil servants.

The second programme analysed in this volume is the "New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme" (新型农村合作医疗, *xinxing nongcun hezuo yiliao*, NRCMS), examined by Armin Müller. It was enacted in late 2002 and implemented in all of rural China between 2003 and 2008. This rural health insurance focuses on reimbursing people for catastrophic health expenditures, usually in connection with inpatient treatment. Its official target was to combat illness-induced poverty. While the NRCMS enhances rural households' financial capacity to pay for health services, its effectiveness has been partly undermined by informal practices connected to premium collection (Müller 2016). So far, there is little systematic evidence indicating the attainment of its primary goal (Liang et al. 2012). Müller's article analyses portability arrangements, administrative reforms, and the marginalisation of migrant workers with regard to health insurance (see below). It focuses on an institutional analysis of the NRCMS in the context of the systemic interdependence of health insurance, the household registration system, and administrative decentralisation. In terms of data, it is largely based on fieldwork in the rural areas and on the analysis of grey literature and administrative documents (see also: Klotzbücher et al. 2010).

The third programme, analysed in the article by Matthias Stepan and Lu Quan, is the "New Type Rural Social Insurance Pension" (新型农村社会养老保险, *xinxing nongcun shehui yanglao baoxian*; also known as the New Rural Pension Scheme, NRPS) enacted by the central government in 2009. The NRPS aims to guarantee a basic old-age income for the elderly in rural areas, supporting yet not replacing the social function of the family. Family remains the main pillar in providing old-age income and especially care. The programme's benefits are composed of a basic pension financed through transfers from different levels of government, and benefits from individual savings accounts funded by premiums and local government contributions. Stepan and Lu argue that international actors played an important role in the policy process leading to the NRPS policy, as they helped the Chinese public administration to build the necessary capacities. However, they present evidence that the major shift in policy orientation towards the Chinese countryside and the role of the state in providing social security are more important in explaining the establishment of the scheme than is learning from abroad. Unlike previous initiatives, the NRPS benefits from a substantial amount of govern-

ment transfers (Stepan 2016). Stepan and Lu use data from expert interviews, administrative documents, and statistical data to found their argument.

The articles by Liu and Sun and by Stepan and Lu implicitly operate with a unipolar concept of marginality, in which the poor and the rural population are seen as marginalised groups vis-à-vis a privileged social core of (mainland) Chinese society as a whole. This conceptualisation is inherent in the policy designs of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee, the NRPS, and the NRCMS. Müller's paper on the NRCMS employs a bipolar concept of marginalisation, viewing migrant workers as caught between their respective sending and receiving communities. It focuses on local government approaches to overcome this marginalisation within the NRCMS programme.

Ethnic Identity and Migration

Ethnic Identity

Migration and ethnic identity is the second thematic field the contributions in this volume focus on. With regard to ethnic identity, a unipolar perspective on marginalisation would distinguish a supposedly homogeneous core of Han Chinese population from minority nationalities. China's minorities are highly heterogeneous in their cultural, economic, and political traditions and in their religious creeds. Larger groups, such as Tibetans and Mongolians, have scripted languages, their own canon of literature, and look back at a history of independent statehood. Other groups are small in numbers and lack scripted languages and a strong and enduring sense of minority identity.

The marginalisation of China's minority nationalities strongly manifests itself in the dimension of social space. Though minorities make up less than 10 per cent of China's population, the autonomous regions associated with them cover almost two-thirds of China's territory. They include, most notably, Western China's vast Himalayan mountains, the deserts and arid regions of the Northwest, and the grasslands and steppe in the North. The historic expansion of the Han Chinese has been connected to a massive assimilation of other ethnicities, but has also been accompanied by the spatial displacement and marginalisation of many of the cultural and ethnic groups that are

today classified as minority nationalities. Many of those groups live in remote, poor, and sparsely populated mountainous regions, whereas the areas most suitable for agriculture, dense population, and profitable economic activities are often inhabited by Han majorities (Heberer 2013).

China's minority nationalities remain in a marginal position vis-à-vis the ethnic and cultural "core" of the Han population, despite affirmative action and other efforts in politics and higher education, and even though the homogeneity of the Han population itself is questionable. The relationship between China's different ethnic and cultural groups is strained because of a lack of genuine political autonomy, the increasing influx of Han migrants into formerly (more) homogeneous minority territories, the CCP's project of modernising and "civilising" so-called "backward" areas and ethnic groups, and the conflicting cultural notions regarding the role and nature of law and the state (Heberer 2013).

Based on fieldwork in Qinghai Province, the paper by Ute Wallenböck explores ethnic marginalisation from a multipolar perspective, taking into account the relationships between different minority groups, as well as between minorities and Han. Her research focuses on a minority area within a minority area: Henan County, a Mongolian Autonomous County under the jurisdiction of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The ethnic Mongolians there have historically been located on the margins of the Han Chinese and Tibetan spheres of cultural influence. One focus of her study is the creation of the ethnic classification system in the PRC, its marginalising effects, and the strategic responses of Henan County's local population to this system. The effects of this interplay of structure and agency are traced in the "tibetanisation" of the Henan Mongols, and the creation of an ethno-culturally hybrid buffer zone between the Tibetan and Mongolian spheres of cultural influence.

Migration

The marginalisation of migrant workers has been a popular field of study in recent years, characterised by misunderstood and overestimated reform commitments by the central government on one side, and its inability to enforce its visions against the status-quo-oriented interests of local governments on the other (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Davies and Ramia 2008). Different conceptual approaches to

marginalisation steer the gaze of the researcher in different directions. A unipolar concept looks at the "urban" population with a non-agricultural household registration as a core group of privileged citizens. Many studies on rural-to-urban migrants in China implicitly employ this perspective, which to some extent invokes the idea of permanent and formalised urban residence as the target of migration. The social core can be defined either as the urban population of a specific locality, or on a national level in terms of social citizenship in general (see, for example, Nielsen 2005; Solinger 1999). Solinger's work takes the situation of the rural sending communities into account, but her conceptual framework of citizenship is connected to a national frame of reference. Furthermore, many contributions in *Marginalization in Urban China* implicitly operate with a unipolar concept of marginalisation, which is connected to the spatial dynamics of migrant-labour segregation within China's growing cities (Webster and Wu 2010). A bi- or multipolar concept of marginalisation on the other hand focuses on the migrants' position between their rural sending points and their urban destination points. Such a perspective is often taken by studies which emphasise circular migration and migrants' social networks across the urban/rural divide (see, for example, Fan 2008; Gaetano 2015).

Under the planned economy, internal migration was strictly controlled by the system of household registration, which had comprehensive functions in the allocation of goods and services through state actors. The *hukou* system served as a tool of economic planning and of controlling the mobility of the population. In the reform period, the controls on internal migration were relaxed, and larger streams of formal and informal migration emerged. Formal *hukou* migration was largely moving from East to West, and is associated with the influx of Han Chinese into the vast and sparsely populated minority areas of the West. Informal migration without a change in household registration is largely associated with labour migration from the countryside to the urban centres, and from Central and Western China to the coastal rim. Informal migration supplies China's fast-growing coastal centres with cheap, largely unskilled labour, which is not entitled to local social benefits such as housing or social insurance due to its informal status. At the same time, it offers rural citizens opportunities to increase their income and social standing in their communities of origin. Labour migrants thus tend to face marginalisation in their

urban destinations and enhanced social standing in their rural communities of origin. Labour migration often becomes a strain on family relations, complicating childcare, education, and eldercare arrangements (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Murphy 2002; Sun and Liu 2014; Wang 2012; Watson 2009).

Rumin Luo's contribution takes a unipolar perspective on self-employed migrant traders working in the informal sector and the formal institutions that marginalise them in the local context of Shanghai. Her paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in a speculative market for stamps, telephone cards, and banknotes. Due to the formal institutional structures of the *danwei* and *hukou* system, her interviewees are marginalised in terms of social participation vis-à-vis a core group of local Shanghai residents, who are entitled to public services and social benefits on the basis of a formal household registration and formal employment. The migrants assume new norms, codes of conduct, and informal practices, while employing different strategies to overcome their marginalisation: for example, some seek fake employment relationships in fake companies to attain the necessary paperwork to get access to local security, education, and local housing. This kind of artificiality is justified as a new norm against the unequal formal institutions. Furthermore, the migrants cultivate personal relationships (关系, *guanxi*) as a common practice in order to get their children enrolled in Shanghai schools, which are associated with good opportunities for their offspring. Informal institutions in this case are legitimised by acting both divergently to and in parallel with the formal institutions, and can serve to empower the marginalised vis-à-vis the core group.

Armin Müller's paper takes a bipolar perspective on marginalisation and migration, considering both the sending and destination points. Migrant workers are marginalised by the systemic interdependence between *hukou* and health insurance in the context of decentralisation. They are entitled to participation in social insurance and other social benefits (such as parcels of collective land), but these benefits are connected to their locality of registration. The majority of rural-to-urban migrants who remain in their county of registration continue to have access to insurance, whereas those who migrate across prefectural and provincial borders tend to lose access. Local governments benefit from these arrangements – both at the rural sending and urban destination points – and thus often lack incentives

to create more flexible migration regimes. The paper analyses various local experiments with the creation of portability regimes and administrative reforms, and how they are embedded within the complex structures of bureaucratic interest and conflict in the PRC.

Summary

The contributions in this volume of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* provide exciting insights into the latest state of research on marginalised groups and reflect the diversity of social-scientific China Studies in Europe and the world today. Table 1 summarises the articles in this volume, which look at different forms and dimensions of marginalisation and thus provide a glimpse of the diversity and complexity of social phenomena associated with this concept. The two themes of this contribution reflect major lines of scientific inquiry in China Studies: social security, and ethnic identity and migration. The marginalised groups studied are the (urban and rural) poor, the rural population (the elderly in particular), migrant workers, and ethnic Mongolians in Qinghai Province. The foci of analysis are several social policy initiatives meant to compensate for marginalisation – namely, the *dibao*, the NRCMS, and the NRPS – and the construction of informal institutions and ethnic identity by the marginalised groups. The studies in this volume implicitly employ uni-, bi-, and multipolar concepts of marginalisation, and range from studies of transnational knowledge diffusion over the analysis of policy change in a national or subnational context to ethnographic studies.

The two ethnographic studies focus on the micro-level and provide us with new insights about processes of social marginalisation and how the marginalised subjects react to it. Rather than passively enduring the effects of the structural forces, they devise strategies of active engagement with, or informal bypassing of, the respective institutions in order to pursue their own interests. The two macro-level studies explore the link between national policy processes and the global diffusion of ideas and knowledge. The central government perceives marginalised groups as a potential risk for social and political stability, but it has also distanced itself from the egalitarian social ideology of the Maoist era. Instead, it engages in a pragmatic and gradual fight against marginalisation, an approach that draws on social policy experiences and models from North America and Europe,

as well as from Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. New ideas about social policies are entering China's political system via the mediation of epistemic communities and international organisations, and they are processed by the interaction of different bureaucratic interest groups and the experimentation-based policy processes of China's political system. The article on the NRCMS illustrates the potential unintended consequences of such new social policies. Using the *hukou* system as an institutional foundation, the NRCMS reinforces its marginalising effects by excluding large numbers of migrant workers from health insurance benefits. Furthermore, it sheds light on the experimental development of policy solutions for these issues in a local context, and the dynamics of their diffusion and dissemination (see also: Heilmann 2008).

Table 1. Summary of the Contributions

	Liu and Sun	**Stepan and Lu**	**Müller**	**Luo**	**Wallenböck**
Marginalised group	The poor	Rural population	Rural-to-urban migrants	Rural-to-urban migrants in Shanghai	Mongols in Henan County
Focus	Social assistance	Rural pensions	Rural health insurance	Informal institutions	Ethnic status and identity
Level of analysis	National / global	National / global	National / local	Local	Local
Approach to marginalisation	Unipolar	Unipolar	Bipolar	Unipolar	Multipolar

The contributions in this issue furthermore illustrate that research implicitly operates with different concepts of marginalisation: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar. The research interest and object of study critically determine which approach provides the greatest conceptual fit and economy of usage. Central government policies such as the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee, the NRPS, and the NRCMS are largely informed by unipolar concepts of marginalisation, which implicitly define urban residents with formal employment relations

and social insurance coverage as a single social core. The case of the NRCMS shows that such implicit assumptions can breed unintended consequences, which have to be corrected in subsequent iterations of experimentation-based policy processes. A unipolar concept of marginalisation fits the migrant workers in Shanghai in Luo's study, as the city here has the dominant function of an aspirational space. A minority of migrant workers in China settle down permanently in the urban areas with their families with the intention of becoming urban residents and acquiring an urban *hukou*. The majority of migrant workers, however, engage in circular migration: they pursue a split-household strategy and oscillate between their rural sending place and one or several urban destination areas. A bi- or multipolar concept of marginalisation can enrich and deepen the insights of research on their social situations, lifeworlds, and social security needs, as the paper on the NRCMS system shows (Fan 2008; Han, Jin, and He 2011).

How do China's social policies influence social stratification and economic inequality? As a consequence of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, some citizens of the People's Republic "became rich first" or joined the ranks of the middle classes. A substantial distance in terms of income, education, and privilege separates them from urban workers, migrant workers, and their offspring. The reproduction of class differences across generations in China's education system raises important questions about the conditions of social mobility in Chinese society (Woronov 2015). Through much of the reform period, the institutions of social security – and social insurance in particular – have increased overall income inequality rather than balancing it out (Feng, Hu, and Moffit 2015). Much like private and commercial institutions of social security, the state provided social protection for distinct social groups, while excluding others. Social assistance programmes have long had an equalising effect due to systematic targeting of weak and marginalised groups, which raises the expectation of the *dibao* programme to enhance equality. However, its equalising effects are potentially decreased by financial shortfalls in public budgets, its narrow targeting of households with a local *hukou*, restrictive regulations, and different forms of embezzlement and fraud (Solinger 2010). Health insurance programmes such as the NRCMS offer only partial coverage regarding the types of services and drugs consumed and the share of the overall costs they reimburse. The co-payments

facilitate a distribution of benefits that is biased towards high- and middle-income households. Social assistance for medical costs often only pays for NRCMS premiums, which only marginally enhances low-income households' access to health services. Different premium classes in the NRPS potentially create a similar bias in benefit distribution. In order to facilitate domestic demand and transform China's model of economic growth, the central government needs to provide effective protection against social risks. Crucial advances have been made in laying the institutional foundations of a more effective social security system, and creating preconditions for an expansion of social benefits that can relieve the pressure on Chinese households to save their incomes as a tool of risk management.

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